

Chapter Title: Introduction: The Idiot, the Voyeur, and the Moralist

Book Title: Artist Animal

Book Author(s): Steve Baker

Published by: University of Minnesota Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctt32bcpf.4>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



University of Minnesota Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Artist Animal*

JSTOR

Introduction

The Idiot, the Voyeur, and the Moralist

The introduction explains things, but clumsily.
Everything is much quieter and more filled
with exceptions than how I've presented it.

—Nicholson Baker, *The Anthologist*

CAN CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS BE TRUSTED with animals, living or dead? Can they be trusted to act responsibly, ethically, when their work engages with questions of animal life? Will they put ethics first, or will they put the interests of their art *before* ethics? Both in and beyond the field of “animal studies” that has burgeoned in the arts, humanities, and social sciences over the past twenty years, these seem widely regarded as pertinent questions. And when they are posed in this form, the answer is frequently *no, artists are not to be trusted*. Here, to begin, are two notably uncompromising expressions of this mistrust and disapproval.

In *Transgressions: The Offences of Art*, a highly original but decidedly idiosyncratic book, Anthony Julius is especially critical of the disturbing hybrid creatures that have become familiar in the “transgressive” art of recent decades. “They are counter-Enlightenment taunts,” he writes. “They present the monsters, the taxidermic aberrations, that a humanity unconstrained by moral scruple, basest when least confined, will produce. . . . These man-beasts . . . deny the divinity of the human form that is the premise of Western art.” Julius, writing outside the field of animal studies, is almost exclusively concerned with the representation of the human, and he laments the fact that in such artworks “that most fundamental of hierarchies, which places the human above the merely animal, is subverted.”¹

For the animal studies scholar Randy Malamud, it is the harm (whether actual or symbolic) done to animals that is the focus of his concern, in the work of artists ranging from Damien Hirst to Eduardo Kac. “What boundaries or guidelines (if any) are there that mediate what we do with animals? What ethical guidelines? What aesthetic guidelines?” he asks. His answer is that “any extant guidelines are cultural conventions,” and the artists of whom he disapproves “show these to be malleable, dispensable in the cause of art.” In a familiar rhetorical move, Malamud puts the word *artist* in quotation marks whenever he wants to communicate his disapproval or skepticism, and on occasion he will simply refuse to engage with the work. “One could enter into a long and heated debate” about how Hirst’s animal installations “relate to the tradition of art,” he acknowledges, before declaring: “But I prefer not to have that discussion, and simply to dismiss him as brutal.”² Malamud’s “interest in prohibitory ethics” has been described as striking “strongly conservative tones,”³ but while he is more outspoken than many, the mistrust he shares with Julius of artists who seem “unconstrained by moral scruple” finds widespread expression in recent years.

Why should this be the case? There are, of course, influential historical precedents: Iris Murdoch notes that Plato “constantly and emphatically accuses artists of moral weakness or even baseness.”⁴ Whether that is the basis for contemporary mistrust is debatable. Some of the grander claims made on behalf of contemporary art may understandably be viewed with skepticism, but that’s a rather different matter. Carol Gigliotti points in this context to the clichéd assertion “that art is a last bastion for radical thinking,” and both she (with an art background) and Lynda Birke (with a science background) have identified what they see as unconvincing uses of that assertion as a rationale to justify art’s disregard of animals’ interests in its recent engagement with genetic technologies, in particular.⁵

The proposal made in the present book is a different one. It is that art has the potential to offer a distinct way of framing or unframing issues, not an approach that’s more radical or open-minded or curious or inventive than the thinking found in other disciplines, but one that simply employs *different* tools for thinking, and one that’s sometimes viewed with suspicion because of their unfamiliarity.

So, against the grain of much contemporary commentary, this book presents the case for the importance of trusting artists to operate with integrity in relation to the animals that figure in their work. It argues that in approaching such work, there's much to be gained by setting out with the *expectation* that artists can be trusted to act in this manner. Why does this matter? It matters because the tendency in some quarters to regard artists as opportunistic sensationalists who have no real disciplinary grounding represents a profoundly uncreative aspect of contemporary culture. In *The Whole Creature*, a brilliant study of the wider cultural implications of research on biosemiotics, Wendy Wheeler usefully characterizes creativity as “a state of prepared receptivity”—a phrase equally apt as a definition of trust.⁶ And an untrusting, unreceptive creativity seems like a contradiction in terms.

The approach taken here attends closely to how artists work and to what they say about their work. As a character in a Paul Auster novel puts it: “For the moment, our only task is to study the pictures as attentively as we can and refrain from drawing any premature conclusions.”⁷ The book contends that contemporary art's distinctive contribution to understandings of human–animal relations will be recognized only if artists' practices—flawed and provisional as they may be—are taken seriously. To impose questions of ethics before even attending to the art is, at the very least, to risk failing to take those practices seriously.

The central question to be addressed is simply this: *what happens when artist and animal are brought into juxtaposition in the context of contemporary art?* The title *ARTIST|ANIMAL* deliberately holds those two terms in juxtaposition, without specifying either the characteristics or the consequences of their alignment. Those are what the book explores. Subsequent chapters therefore consider artworks from the first decade of the twenty-first century by a small selection of contemporary artists from America, Europe, and Australasia who engage directly with questions of animal life. These are artists, in other words, whose concern is with the nature and the quality of actual animal life, or with the human experience of actual animal lives. For the most part, at least, their art treats animals as creatures who actively share the more-than-human world with humans, rather than as mere symbols or metaphors for aspects of the so-called

human condition. The spread is nevertheless still fairly wide, running from artists with ecological concerns, to those engaging with the temporary or permanent modification of animal bodies, to those seeking to further the cause of animal rights through their work.

There will be exceptions to this general picture, not least because the symbolic resonance of animals is not always easily separable from their literal presence in the gallery or in art's other spaces.⁸ The bulk of this introduction, for example, deals with two troubling gallery-based artworks that undoubtedly paid insufficient attention to the well-being of the animals they used, and where the animals' use was in any case primarily for symbolic purposes. These are hard cases that test to the limit the proposal that artists are to be trusted to operate with integrity in their dealings with animals.

So why is discussion of these two artworks included here? First, to acknowledge the existence of such cases in the canon of recent and contemporary art, and second, to indicate how disconcertingly difficult it is to hold apparently irresponsible artworks at a safe distance from works that deal more explicitly and sympathetically with questions of animal life, of which it may seem easier to approve. The waters are muddied from the start, and arguments for putting the ethics before the art are not going to change that. To express this a little less contentiously, the language of regulatory or proscriptive or "prohibitory" ethics does not look likely to shed much light on these difficult issues, nor to offer much leverage for addressing them and learning from them.

Burning Rats . . .

Consider the case of this old but still-instructive artwork: over thirty-five years ago, on February 17, 1976, the artist Kim Jones presented a performance called *Rat Piece* in the Union Gallery at California State University, Los Angeles. The following pages build up a picture of this complex, controversial piece to point out its historically specific and probably unrepeatable qualities, but also, perhaps more uncomfortably, to point to certain thematic continuities with the concerns of much contemporary animal art. For readers who are unfamiliar with Jones's *Rat Piece*, it involved the burning of living rats: burning them, that is to say, *as a means of making art*.

The initial description of the performance, here, draws both on Martin Harries's useful summary of it in 2007 and on Jones's clarification of specific details in 2011. Harries writes: "Available evidence suggests that *Rat Piece* was a slow, deliberate, even meditative performance. Over about half an hour or so, Jones—lean, muscular, face hidden under a pair of pantyhose—stripped, slathered himself with mud, donned the headpiece and wooden structure of Mudman"—Mudman being the artist's performance identity.⁹

In this guise, walking through the performance space, Jones notes that he "read some statements as to how I feel while doing a performance. There was nervous laughter from the audience." He then removed a white bedsheet covered with numbers that had been concealing a wire-metal hatbox containing three live rats and some paper. He writes: "The performance went from humor to horror when I brought out a small container of Wizard lighter fluid and squirted the rats setting them on fire."¹⁰ Harries comments: "The rats' deaths were gradual: Jones periodically fed the fire with more fluid. The panicked rats scampered up the edges of the cage, ran in circles, and screamed as they neared death. Jones briefly screamed, too."¹¹

Jones states that he "poured sand from Venice Beach" over the rats once they were dead. He then covered up the "cage," removed his performance costume, and put his clothes back on over his mud-covered body before leaving the gallery space. He was subsequently convicted of cruelty to animals and penalized with a small fine. Of the conviction, he writes: "They charged me with three counts. One for each rat. A misdemeanor." And of the fine: "My lawyer cost \$500. The fine was \$190. I was paid \$50. The performance was free."¹²

The artist's subsequent reflections on the piece are revealing, if surprising. In a 2005 interview he stated:

When I did it people went nuts. . . . People still get upset about it. I can understand that because I tortured the animals to death, but it was important for me to have that experience as an art piece . . . to actually have the audience that went to see this experience the smell of death and to actually have control in a certain way. They could have stopped me.¹³

Jones made a similar statement two months after the 1976 performance:

I wanted to see if they would stop me. It would not have stopped the performance it merely would have changed it. . . . I would have struggled physically with them, but not for long, but I would've wanted to [see] it through to that point. . . . They said I was cruel, yet none of them tried to prevent it when they could've.¹⁴

Jones has related the performance to his experience as a U.S. marine in Vietnam in 1967–68. In an artist statement from 1983 he recalled “our camp covered with rats they crawled over us at night they got in our food we catch them in cages and burn them to death i remember the smell.”¹⁵

Harries states that Jones performed *Rat Piece* only once, but in a 2006 interview the artist himself noted that it “got started as a design project in 1972 when I was at Otis. That was when the whole faculty got very upset with me and they wanted to kick me out. . . . Basically what I did was I burned some rats to death in the sculpture garden and filmed it with a little Super 8 camera.” Only later did he get an offer to do such work at Cal State, and as he says, “That’s when I did the more-or-less official rat piece. I went out and I bought three male rats and as part of the performance I burned them to death. . . . Half the audience left, half stayed. . . . one woman ran out screaming ‘you’re sick, you’re sick.’ I’d have done it even if one or two people were in the audience.”¹⁶

War themes crop up frequently in Jones’s work, as does rat imagery in certain other pieces, but this performance is said by the artist to be one of the very few works to refer to his experience in Vietnam. In the 2006 interview he clarified that he had no intention of his work “being a kind of therapy for me or anyone else.” However, in response to the interviewer’s question about “a strong autobiographical narration” in his work, Jones said: “Oh yeah. It’s all about what happened and is still going on in my life.”¹⁷ Elsewhere he has said of his work: “I have my individual experiences. They seep out of my art,” and he has characterized that art as a reaching for the most “potent images” in his life.¹⁸

There is, to say the least, a certain tension between Jones’s comments about the audience and its failure to intervene on behalf of the burning rats, and his acknowledgment of his own autobiographical motivations. In one sense, Mudman’s role in the *Rat Piece* performance is something like a force of nature: the audience, he suggests, could have tried to minimize

the harm caused by this unstoppable force of nature, but the artist himself could not or would not. Their intervention “would not have stopped the performance it merely would have changed it,” as he puts it. Looking back, in 1998, on his experience of the rats in Vietnam, and on the relation of that experience to *Rat Piece*, he said to the art writer Linda Weintraub: “I wanted to bring this home, to show it with its smell, screams, and the responsibility for stopping it—not just tell about it. You can’t really write about a burning. It does not have the impact of actually seeing something die. It is horrible, to have control over it.” He controlled the making of the piece, this seems to imply, but could not himself extend this control to what he calls “the responsibility for stopping it.”¹⁹

It would be very easy to read this as a simple abnegation of responsibility on the part of the artist. But, despite its being irreconcilable with the strong autobiographical references in this performance, Jones seems to have been trying to fashion a role for the artist not as one who judges or moralizes but as one who presents an unadorned reality, of which others can make what they wish. This comes across most clearly in his comment in 1998: “Mudman doesn’t have a personality or a mission. I think the audience has a personality. The audience may have a mission.”²⁰

Harries argues that one distinctive effect of *Rat Piece* in 1976 was that it “made the pain of rats—usually killed out of sight—visible, even shareable, in a rare way.”²¹ He suggests that the piece has a “doubled force” because “it simultaneously insists on the suffering of these three, particular male rats and suggests a set of powerful and perhaps incompatible allegories—rats as U.S. soldiers, as Vietnamese civilians, as signifiers of a world of mediated suffering to which the witness does not know how to respond.” In his view it gains this doubled force by moving between “assigning a human meaning to the suffering of rats and insisting on the suffering of rats as the suffering of rats.”²² He rightly points to just how unusual this was at the time. The philosopher Peter Singer’s book *Animal Liberation*, he notes, which played a vital part in the growth of the animal rights movement in the final quarter of the twentieth century, had been published only one year earlier, and Harries suggests that even for Singer the rat was “the limit case,” the animal least likely to attract human sympathy.²³

The purpose of this brief account of this undoubtedly controversial artwork is not to propose a straightforward ethical condemnation of the

artist—“this courteous, reserved man,” as Weintraub calls him—or even to condemn the work itself, tempting though that, at least, may be.²⁴ The fact that the performance happened over thirty-five years ago certainly makes a difference. Like Joseph Beuys’s better-known gallery performance with a living coyote in 1974, the juxtaposition of living animals and a rather clumsy human symbolism now seems very much of its time, though Harries is absolutely right to see the gradual emergence of the living animal’s role *as itself*—instead of, or at least in addition to animal imagery’s more traditional symbolic role—as something of an innovation in the art of the 1970s. As I have argued elsewhere, notwithstanding the British artist Damien Hirst’s continuing use of dead animal bodies to address questions of *human* mortality in a striking manner, one characteristic of much post-modern animal art is its refusal of symbolism, its insistence on carving out a space in which the physical body of the animal—living or dead—can be present as itself.²⁵

It is not really possible to say that a work such as *Rat Piece* could not or would not be made in the second decade of the twenty-first century, by Jones or anyone else. It’s certainly the case that very little contemporary art involves the torturing of living animals—though an alarming amount of that art may still involve animals’ deaths, as is acknowledged in the case of three of the artists interviewed for this book, whose work is discussed in subsequent chapters.²⁶ None of the artworks discussed in those chapters may seem quite as disturbing or contentious as *Rat Piece*, but Jones’s 1976 performance nevertheless haunts the book as a warning against complacency and moral self-satisfaction, because in several significant ways it remains highly contemporary in its outlook.

What are these “contemporary” features of the piece? There are four that come immediately to mind. First, there is Jones’s concern with *materiality*: the material presence of living bodies, human and animal, awareness of their surfaces heightened by distortion—mud on the artist’s body, flames on the rats’ bodies. Second, there is the concern with *immediate and direct experience*: actual death, rather than its mere description or representation. Third, there is the artist’s *attentiveness to form*: in this case the gruesome detail of feeding the fire with more lighter fluid whenever the flames started to die down. And lastly, there is the question of *not judging*: trying—no matter how unsuccessfully—to shape a form of art practice

that's not about telling people what to think. Those four concerns—materiality, immediate and direct experience, attentiveness to form, and not judging—find more benign expression in the work of most of the contemporary artists discussed in subsequent chapters, but their importance was already evident in *Rat Piece*.

A further point needs to be made about the performance. In 2007, in connection with a major retrospective exhibition of Jones's work that toured university galleries in Buffalo, Los Angeles, and Washington, the volume *Mudman: The Odyssey of Kim Jones* was published. It included four essays on his work by curators and academics, and offered the opportunity to reconsider *Rat Piece* thirty-one years after its only performance. All four essays discuss the piece at some length. However, unlike Harries's short article in *TDR* the same year (presumably prompted by the first showing of the exhibition, in Buffalo), which tentatively places the performance in the complex dynamic of the aftermath of Vietnam, the developing history of performance art and an emerging animal rights sensibility in the wake of Singer's *Animal Liberation*, these essays seem principally concerned to situate (and to justify) the piece only in relation to Jones's experience as a Vietnam veteran.

Two of the essays are particularly forthright in the manner in which they defend the work. Robert Storr, apparently baffled that it could ever have been open to misunderstanding, notes that it "brought down the wrath of people who judged it a gratuitous act of cruelty towards animals when in fact it was a ritual demonstration of the dehumanization of war."²⁷ In a similar tone, Kristine Stiles, criticizing the art critic Max Kozloff (who in 1976 was also executive editor of *Artforum*), writes: "Lacking insight into a quintessential representation of the Vietnam War by one of its veterans, Kozloff refused to publish images of *Rat Piece*, which he deemed 'cruel theatricalism.'"²⁸ In this respect Storr's and Stiles's standpoints differ markedly from that (or those) of Jones himself. In the years since the performance Jones has—as already indicated—consistently held a set of inconsistent and contradictory perspectives on the piece, its motivations, and its reception. There is nothing particularly wrong with that (and in a later chapter I argue that to expect consistency from artists is one way to miss the character and the strength of how some of them deal with questions of animal life). But Storr and Stiles seem to suggest that there's a single correct

understanding of this performance and that they have it. Neither seems to think that such certainty might actually diminish a work that they both evidently admire.

More intriguingly, Stiles also records Kozloff's view that *Rat Piece* was "sensation-seeking rather than art."²⁹ This is a rather unusual instance of a prominent art critic calling into question the art status of a contemporary artist's work. Conceived and performed in the decade after Don Judd's highly influential statement that "if someone says his work is art, it's art"—which remains just about the only workable "definition" of contemporary art—*Rat Piece* may be judged by many (both then and now) a cruel or contemptible work, but it's unclear what is to be gained by challenging its status as an artwork.³⁰ When Harries writes, "What it means to bound *Rat Piece* as an aesthetic object needs further thought,"³¹ he's not expressing skepticism about the art status of the work but curiosity about Jones's determination that he himself should be able to experience and to think about the killing as an art piece.

In this regard, Harries's attentiveness to the specificity of this artwork stands in marked contrast to more abstract discussions of the "ethics" of art. The philosopher Karen Hanson's exploration of the potential "immorality of art," for example, acknowledges that in some instances there may be "ethical perils on all sides":

The art itself may be immoral, because it puts the audience at a distance; the artist may be judged morally wrong, for producing an object that has this effect; the audience may be judged wrong or inhuman, for taking an aesthetic attitude or remaining still, at a distance, when there is an obligation to intervene.³²

There is nothing to suggest that Hanson was aware of the work, but each of her objections could of course be raised about *Rat Piece*. Jones's own book documenting the performance and its aftermath includes one audience member's reflections on the performance, published two days later in the university newspaper. It begins, "I am ashamed. I witnessed a hideous murder and did nothing to stop it," and goes on to characterize the audience of which he was part in these terms: "We were Romans cheering on

the lions. We were Christians torching a Salem witch. We were a southern mob lynching a black man. We were the Gestapo gassing Jews.”³³

Does this lend weight to Hanson’s dismissal of the idea “that art is somehow beyond the reach of moral criticism”? Not really, because her argument is specifically framed in terms of the question “How bad can good art be?”³⁴ And that sort of question, binding together aesthetic and ethical value judgments, is one that the artists of Jones’s generation had already moved beyond. Speaking in 1968, John Cage encapsulated a more contemporary perspective as follows: “Why do you waste your time and mine trying to get value judgements? . . . Value judgements are destructive to our proper business, which is curiosity and awareness.”³⁵ And as Donna Haraway has noted more recently: “Curiosity is not a nice virtue, but it does have the power to defeat one’s favorite self-certainties.”³⁶

Harries articulates what he regards as the achievement of Jones’s work in a manner that goes beyond the terms of Hanson’s argument, arguing that “it is only as art, only as a performance for an audience that does not intervene, that *Rat Piece* succeeds. . . . The success of the performance relies on the failure of the audience, its failure to intervene.”³⁷ How does this failure define the work’s “success”? Harries writes: “This unhumanitarian nonintervention is crucial to understanding *Rat Piece*. Not to intervene is what it is to be an audience. Audiences do not intervene, or when they do intervene the members of this group become something other than an audience.” Had they intervened, the audience would also have been “asserting a morality putatively superior to that of the artist who killed the three rats.”³⁸ Harries himself doesn’t make the point explicit, but the logic of his argument seems to suggest that the artist, by finely judging the aesthetic provocation of the piece, has enabled his audience to resist the closure of an ethical judgment of the piece. The audience is in that sense *with* the artist, who insisted to Weintraub that he is “not moralistic.”³⁹

From the perspective of animal advocacy, that kind of convoluted argumentation may look self-serving and unconvincing. The first time I spoke about Jones’s performance in a conference keynote, one internationally prominent scientist and animal advocate in the audience had no hesitation in branding the artist a “pervert.” When animals come into the picture, artists, curators, and advocates all too often find themselves talking

past each other, with little understanding of each others' expectations, priorities, and terminologies—a pressing issue that I address more fully in chapter 4.

What is Jones's own current view of *Rat Piece*? On reflection, the question seems unproductive. The philosopher of science Isabelle Stengers states bluntly that “there are no good answers if the question is not the relevant one.”⁴⁰ Addressed to Jones, “What do you think of *Rat Piece* now?” could only really be taken as a clumsy invitation to him either to mount a repeated defense or explanation of the performance, or else to distance himself from the piece, to apologize for it—to put ethics before art, in other words.⁴¹ A more challenging question for the work's contemporary audience might be to ask what would follow from a conscious decision, over thirty-five years later, to *attend* to the work but neither to condone nor to condemn it.

... and Blending Goldfish

The use of the living animal in art is perhaps at its most *arresting* when that animal is caught somewhere between life and death, between reality and representation. Whether or not viewers regard artists' use of living animals as in any way justifiable, the resulting work is almost always difficult and uncomfortable, and can prompt complex ironies and unlikely alliances when art and animal advocacy come face-to-face.

Mark Dion, whose own art installations have included living animals (ranging from African finches to piranhas) on a number of occasions, contributed “Some Notes towards a Manifesto for Artists Working with or about the Living World” to the catalog of the Serpentine Gallery's exhibition *The Greenhouse Effect* in 2000. It is an earnest set of handwritten notes that eschews the irony found in much of Dion's work, and it includes this uncompromising declaration: “Artists working with living organisms must know what they are doing. They must take responsibility for the plants' or animals' welfare. If an organism dies during an exhibition, the viewer should assume the death to be the intention of the artist.”⁴²

The statement could certainly be applied to Marco Evaristi's now notorious installation, *Helena*, first exhibited in the Trapholt Art Museum in Kolding, Denmark, in February 2000. Ten kitchen blenders—Moulinex

Optiblend 2000 Liquidisers, to be precise—were placed on a single table in the gallery space and were visibly connected to the mains. Each blender was filled with water, in which a single living goldfish was swimming. Visitors to the exhibition were free to switch on any blender, “transforming the content to fish soup” as one report flippantly put it. At least one visitor chose to do so, killing two goldfish. After complaints from Friends of Animals, the blenders were unplugged, but the installation (and the goldfish) remained on display. The piece has come to be seen by some as exemplifying art’s cynical manipulation of animals, but it has also been the subject of other more generous readings. Pressed for a comment by a writer in the *New York Times* in 2000, Peter Singer responded in apparent defense of the work, stating that “when you give people the option of turning the blender on, you raise the question of the power we do have over animals.”⁴³

Singer, questioned in 2001 as to the accuracy and context of this remark, which seems to put an admirable trust in the artist’s integrity, replied as follows: “The quote is accurate as far as it goes, but if I recall correctly I also said negative things about the idea.” Summarizing from memory, he suggested that the remark was preceded by “something like: ‘It’s obviously cruel to keep goldfish in a small sterile container like a blender, and it’s horrific to think that people might choose to grind them up on a whim. Nevertheless, I can see that the artist could be making a point about our relations with animals.’”⁴⁴

In much the same way that the critical stances taken in 2007 on Jones’s 1976 performance were particularly revealing, Evaristti’s installation from 2000 came under intense renewed scrutiny in 2008, and the nature of the positions adopted (many of which were less trusting than Singer’s) provides valuable insights into the ways in which art and ethics are currently understood in relation to each other—especially in animal studies. In January 2008 Giovanni Aloï, editor of the online journal *Antennae*, posted an announcement on the H-Animal online discussion network. He had secured an interview with Evaristti for *Antennae*, and he invited H-Animal subscribers to pose questions for inclusion in the interview.⁴⁵

The discussion thread that this prompted had a lively first few weeks, and the first two posts set the tone of what was to follow. One posed the question “Is it ethical to use animals in art?” and the other asked, “When do you consider a piece of artwork . . . that involves the unnecessary death

or cruelty to animals, not art?”⁴⁶ The first direct response to the “Is it ethical?” question came from the artist Bryndís Snæbjörnsdóttir (who works collaboratively with Mark Wilson as Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson). She wrote:

For me and many other artists that engage in socially engaged art, art is a serious tool of investigation and a powerful lever to instigate social change. It is therefore impossible to read the question “Is it ethical to use animals in art?” without thinking “Is it ethical to use animals in science,” “Is it ethical to use animals in cooking?”⁴⁷

Carol Gigliotti wrote in reply: “The connection between the uses of animals in art, science and cooking is not a trivial one. It links three of the most prevalent uses of animals: use as food, use as tools and use as metaphor or cultural mirror.” It was the common theme of “use,” in her view, which prompted “the need for the question of ethics.”⁴⁸

Much art has indeed used (and continues to use) animals and animal imagery “as metaphor or cultural mirror” for humans, and this is an entirely reasonable characterization of what Evaristti’s installation was doing. But this is a very different (and far weaker) account of what art is and does than Snæbjörnsdóttir’s conviction that “art is a serious tool of investigation and a powerful lever to instigate social change.” It is a point that calls for further discussion in later chapters, because a key argument of this book is that contemporary animal art can be more, *and other*, than metaphor and cultural mirror.

Back in the discussion thread, in response to one speculative attempt to distinguish between a work of art that invites people to think about the implications of pushing the button on the blender and a work that allows them to push that button, the philosopher Ralph Acampora wrote: “A moral agent is responsible not only for her own actions, but also (albeit to a lesser degree) for creating conditions that can foreseeably result in adverse consequences.” Another respondent similarly insisted that “ethics is indispensable to art” and that “art is produced with morally relevant presuppositions and intentions.”⁴⁹ The contemporary artist, from this particular perspective, is first and foremost “a moral agent.” Exceptions or alternatives do not seem to be countenanced.

Few posts directly challenged the art status of Evaristti's installation, but there was considerable discussion of what kind of art it could be said to be, and some of that discussion again betrayed a mistrust of artists and a misunderstanding of their practices and motives. Marion Copeland observed, "I prefer art for animals' sakes rather than for art's sake."⁵⁰ Nigel Rothfels's response to this (echoing Singer's remarks in 2000) veered not toward mistrust but toward a rather generous assessment of the artwork and its impact:

the artist . . . clearly posed an important and provocative series of questions to his audience. . . . Doesn't the very starkness (or brutality) of this exhibit ask people to examine all the ways they have trivialized the lives of animals? Can't this work also be conceptualized as "art for animals' sakes"?⁵¹

Boria Sax's skepticism was altogether more typical of other responses: "Artists today may rationalize their work with claims to inspire social change, but we pretty well have to take these on faith."⁵²

In terms of the relevance of this whole discussion thread to the present book, however, it was one of Acampora's interventions that exemplifies the kinds of perceptions and preconceptions that hinder recognition of contemporary art's contribution to ways of thinking about animal life, and hinder that contribution being taken seriously. Thinking, perhaps, of a 2003 news report that quoted the Trapholt Art Museum's director defending Evaristti by saying, "An artist has a right to create works which defy our concept of what is right and what is wrong,"⁵³ Acampora wrote: "The issue was mentioned whether, in effect, morality is binding on art(ists). I don't see how it can't be. . . . Practically (and indeed conceptually) morality is an all-or-none proposition. If anybody is outside its purview, then everybody has to be—otherwise nobody would rationally submit to its norms." Morality is based on "norms"—norms to which everyone is required to "submit." The language, at least, seems to evoke a system based on fear, and one that cannot envisage a creative input into ethical thought and action. This impression is reinforced by the extraordinary sentence that Acampora placed between those quoted above, which read: "If artists are allowed to suspend ethics for the sake of aesthetics, then in short order we should not

be surprised to find many/most transgressors excusing their misdeeds as instances of performance art.”⁵⁴

Given the general drift of many of these comments about art, it’s little wonder that no one chose to respond directly to the lone voice of Kari Weil, who observed: “Of course all this begs the question as to whether art, or the artist, needs or even should be ethical. But that is a different question.”⁵⁵ Different it may be, but it is also an entirely relevant question.

The Limits of Trust?

When the *Antennae* interview with Evaristti was published a month or so after the H-Animal exchanges, it drew from the artist his least ambiguous statement about the role of the goldfish in the *Helena* installation. Commenting on the adverse reactions to the deaths for which he had set the stage, he observed:

To be honest people’s harsh reactions surprised me as we, in my opinion, are surrounded by problems that are so much more serious that we encounter every evening watching the news. It worries me that we are passive in front of these news [*sic*] and that my art piece created such a stir instead. If people find that my use of live goldfish in my art piece is unethical, I would invite them to have a closer look at themselves and the world we live in.⁵⁶

The goldfish-in-blenders scenario enabled the artist to “place people before a dilemma: to choose between life and death,” as he had previously put it,⁵⁷ but the fish themselves were evidently of little account in comparison to “problems that are so much more serious.”

Before the cases of Evaristti and Jones are set to one side, it’s worth remarking briefly on their similarities and their differences. It is clear from their own comments that neither artist was motivated primarily by a concern to alleviate the condition of rats and goldfish. Both seem concerned to face their audiences with the reality of witnessing death, but the deaths that seem to concern them (though neither artist states this explicitly) are those of humans. Jones’s piece took a small detail of his own Vietnam experience—“we set rats on fire . . . it was something we did when we were

bored”—and spun from it a performance that was presented only once to an audience.⁵⁸ In contrast, the specifics of Evaristti's installation have no evident personal resonances for the artist, and the installation was restaged on several occasions in different art institutions.⁵⁹ For both artists—though not necessarily for their audiences—the animals in these works are symbolic (serving as something like Gigliotti's notion of a “cultural mirror”) *and* real. However, for both artists it could probably also be said that the animals' reality matters only in the sense that it lends an *edge*, a certain grittiness, to the creatures' symbolic function in these two works. This, crucially, is where both works differ from most of those discussed in the present book. With few exceptions, the works central to the chapters that follow have been made by artists with a conscious and immediate concern for questions of nonhuman animal life—even when, on occasion, they seem drenched in messy compromises.

One thing that continues to be of particular interest about *Helena* is Evaristti's tripartite categorization of the viewers of this installation: in his words, “The idiot, who pushed the button, the voyeur, who loves to watch, and the moralist.”⁶⁰ His point seems to be that as ways of looking at animals in contemporary art, *none of these perspectives will do*.

There is a wonderful remark that the artist Jim Dine made in the 1960s about the centrality of trust to his own working method. He said: “I trust objects so much. I trust disparate elements going together.”⁶¹ The working methods of Jones and Evaristti certainly seem to do something rather different, bringing together disparate elements that don't, and that *shouldn't*, go together: rats and fire; goldfish and kitchen blenders; the idiot, the voyeur, and the moralist. Yet Jones's insistence that he is not a moralist, and Evaristti's cool mockery of the idea of the moralist,⁶² allow them to hold open (or at the very least to attempt to hold open) aspects of their work in a manner that does, in a sense, seem *trusting*. This is not intended as a defense of either *Rat Piece* or *Helena*. But simply to condemn such works is to learn nothing from them. It is to undermine the very notion of art, to prefer compliance to creativity, for fear that animal abusers might get away with mischievously “excusing their misdeeds as instances of performance art.”

It is hard to see how limits can effectively be put on trust. And there are certainly no points at which it's in any way useful to declare harmful or

cynical work *not* to be art. Why not? Because Snæbjörnsdóttir's conviction that "art is a serious tool of investigation and a powerful lever to instigate social change"—a conviction shared by most of the artists discussed in this book—emerges from broadly the same set of tacit approaches to working with materials and ideas (and the materialization of ideas) that enabled Jones's and Evaristti's works to take the form that they did. Art is what artists make. And as the painter Stephen Farthing has rightly observed: "The question of what is, or is not, art is seldom raised among artists."⁶³

On the other hand, the manner in which that art is characterized does matter. Is it important to know that Jones used Wizard lighter fluid and that Evaristti employed a particular model of Moulinex blender? What does that have to do with the animals whose deaths they brought about? Nothing, perhaps, at the level of ideas, but the very mundanity of the branded object lends singular weight to the rooted-in-unglamorous-materiality of these works. It is this that establishes their continuity with the currency of contemporary art (and older art too): an art grounded in objecthood, objects, things, stuff—the tangible, embodied stuff of the world. It is this sense of the vivid and the tangible that Iain McGilchrist particularly values when he quotes these words from Viktor Shklovsky's essay "Art as Technique": "Art exists that one may recover the sensations of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*."⁶⁴ This is the work undertaken by writing, as well as the work undertaken by art.

The aim here, therefore, is to articulate what might loosely be called the "voice" of some contemporary artists whose work engages seriously with questions of animal life. It's that voice, that distinctiveness from the work of other disciplines, that the H-Animal thread on "Is it ethical to use animals in art?" showed to be insufficiently recognized. The book's contention—which it may or may not be able persuasively to demonstrate—is that artists working in this field are well placed to devise forms of responsible practice: critical and improvisatory and material forms that sidestep a rule-bound or unduly judgmental notion of ethics.

Most of the chapters that follow draw on interviews with artists that were undertaken specifically for this book. Rather than try to "theorize" these artists' work in a rather abstract manner that can too easily prompt unproductive lines of inquiry, the complex interplay of their work and their words is used as a tool that's always already to hand for exploring

their practice. This approach might be thought of as deconstruction undertaken with a relatively light touch: the artists' words working on, working against, working away at their work; and the work working on, against and away at the words—another case, it might be said, of trusting “disparate elements going together.”

The last of the seven main chapters puts forward three distinct exploratory perspectives on the manner in which animals figure in the works discussed in the preceding chapters, and in a number of newly introduced examples. The first of these perspectives concerns *place*: more specifically, animals' location and dislocation in works of contemporary art. The second investigates the distinctive *form* of the “animal-object-in-art.” And the third considers whether the animal itself could be said to be the *medium* in which these artists are working.

Scattered between the book's seven chapters are half a dozen short critical reflections, touching on topics such as intention, attention, and the tensions between creative practice and certain kinds of ethical demands or expectations. The more substantial afterword then offers some remarks on how the recognition of contemporary artists' contribution to the wider project of the posthumanities might challenge the view held in some quarters that it is primarily the field of philosophy that “is able to hold open the possibility that thought might proceed otherwise in regard to animals.”⁶⁵